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ABSTRACT

Labor unions hold a somewhat different view of "workplace literacy" efforts than company management often does. Unions believe that workplace literacy programs should be voluntary and involve more that just "work" skills. As in union education of the past, union programs focus on education of the whole worker for life, not just for work. Unions want employers to educate workers for high-skill, well-paid, permanent jobs, not for low-skill, subsistence-wage jobs. Unions also believe that literacy education is only one component of more productive work and that it needs to go hand-in-hand with having the right technologies and structuring jobs for better results. Several successful literacy education programs are being conducted by unions, often in cooperation with management. One of these programs, a collaboration between Ford and the United Auto Workers, uses a whole-language approach to reading and a similar approach to mathematics. Other successful programs provide videocassettes for home study by workers. (KC)

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MYTH #15:

MANAGEMENT AND LABOR AGREE ON LITERACY GOALS

There is more than a fine line of difference between workplace literacy and worker literacy. The former is the byword of today's business leadership, its centerpiece for improving productivity. The latter is a view from the other side, that of labor unions which see broader uses for the adult literacy movement. The former reflects the new National Goals; attaining universal literacy among adults (goal #6) primarily will improve the nation's competitiveness, the goal implies. Unions, however, emphasize that literacy is more than skills for work. It is lifelong and guided by "self-chosen aims," in the words of Anthony Sarmiento, assistant director of the AFL-CIO Department of Education.

Worker's education or labor education--there are several terms that have been used over the years--began when the union movement took off. Samuel Gompers set the tone in 1916: "(Unions)...realize that education is an attitude toward life--an ability to see and understand problems and to utilize information and forces for the best solution of (life's) problems."

In the 1930s labor unions even sponsored residential colleges, such as Brookwood in New York and Work People's College in Duluth, where students took everything from history to poetry to labor drama. Every union now has an education function, and the AfL-CIO's George Meany Center for Labor Studies in a suburb of Washington, D.C., provides short-term courses for union leaders on such topics as arbitration, safety, and labor law; it also offers a degree program through Antioch College for leaders selected for residence.

Much of the early education and research functions of labor unions moved into academia. Many midwest campuses in the country's industrial belt set up centers for the study of labor; Cornell has a School of Industrial and Labor Relations; Institutes of Labor Relations are housed on the campuses of the University of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles.

However, the current push for workplace literacy has renewed the union movement's support of "lifelong learning." Unions are willing partners with employers in many of the most innovative workplace literacy programs (some are described below). They generally do so with two caveats: programs need to be shaped by workers to their personal goals (the reason why union-run literacy programs are preferred to those sponsored by employers); and workplaces need to change as much as workers' skills, if high literacy is the goal.

In the adult literacy world, the rhetoric of employers and unions about why programs are necessary seems very similar. They both want workers to be able to cope with changes in the workplace. Negotiations are needed sometimes to figure out how to accomplish this. And what the workplace will look like.

The Union View

"Worker-centered learning" is part of the title of a guide issued in 1990 by the AFL-CIO Education Department and sums up its attitude about literacy programs for workers. While company-sponsored programs often have to campaign to recruit enrollees and the dropout rate from typical public-funded adult literacy programs is very high, "unions have leverage with their members," says Sarmiento. "The reason participation in union-sponsored programs continues to grow is because we do not have problems with recruiting."

Worker-centered learning, according to the AFL-CIO:

- o builds on what workers already know. (even non-readers have knowledge and skills to bring to the effort);
- o addresses the needs of the whole person;
- o involves workers and their unions actively in developing and planning programs;
- o makes decisionmaking a participatory process--it is bottom up and reflects concerns and view of workers;
- o provides equal access at the workplace, regardless of basic skills or classification;

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o is designed to reflect diverse learning styles of workers;
o involves workers in designing tests and assessments;
o keeps classroom records confidential;
and o is integrated into a larger strategy for responding to anticipated changes in the workplace.

Not all unions have the capacity to run programs like this, but they can negotiate for them, says the AFL-CIO.

In setting up its Career Development Institute last year, the United Steel Workers of America summed up the union philosophy: "(T)he Institute rejects the erroneous and discredited premise that workers have much to learn but nothing to teach. The success of the Institute will show that our members have much more to offer than the strength of their bodies; when given the opportunity, they can and do contribute in countless ways to the success and security of the working relationship."

Also, this worker-developed design borrows from literacy efforts in other countries. According to research by Frontier College, a national adult literacy resource in Canada, the most successful workplace programs are those designed and run by employees. Long-term worker training and education programs are the negotiated norm in many European countries, usually sponsored jointly by employers, employees, and government.

One of the myths which union statements try to expose is that the private sector is making a tremendous investment in employees. A figure of $30 billion a year for formal training is cited often. However, Anthony Carnevale of the American Society for Training and Development and Paul Osterman of the Economic Policy Institute, as well as other researchers, contend that almost all of those who receive training are managerial and technical elites. Their estimates put the total investment at only about 1.4 percent of payroll expenses nationwide. Only 8 percent of frontline workers benefit.

The other caveat--that literacy is only one component of more productive work--puts literacy programs into a broad context. Having the right technologies and structuring jobs for better results need to go hand-in-hand with improving worker skills, unions say. The quick-fix view of investment, looking only toward next quarter's bottom line, is an American-made strategy that is not helping productivity, Sarmiento stresses. He endorses the conclusions of last year's report, "America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!" (National Center on Education and the Economy, Rochester, N.Y.). It contends the business community in the United States is following a low-wage, low-skill policy, which will leave the American economy out in the cold.

Sarmiento describes different scenarios to illustrate this conclusion. Workplace literacy programs at companies on the low-wage path are: prescriptive, top down; quick fix; narrow content, job specific; mandatory; emphasize curriculum development; start with literacy audit/literacy task analysis. Their goal, he says, is a "dispensable, disposable workforce."

Literacy programs at companies with high-skill policies are: participatory; ongoing; broad content, less job specific; voluntary; emphasize relationships; and start with organizational analysis. According to Sarmiento, they seek "an experienced, secure workforce."

Exemplary Union-Negotiated Literacy Programs

In the early 1980s, when the automobile industry was in an even deeper slump than now, the United Automobile Workers and Ford and General Motors negotiated a number of items to improve the job security of workers to balance wage concessions by the union. Among these was the establishment of a joint national employee development and training program at each company, funded by company contributions per worker hour. The **Joint Funds** are independent of the companies but are managed jointly by personnel from unions and management.

The Ford program developed quickly, initially placing much of the activity in the already established UAW-Ford National Education, Development, and Training Center in Dearborn, Mich. Over the decade the allocation to the Fund increased; approximately $35-$40 million is now available for employee development and training under the Fund.

For current employees the Fund provides education information and planning; basic skills, including the GED and English-as-a-second-language classes, usually provided at plant sites; tuition up to $1,500 per year for self-selected education/training at approved institutions; personal development courses, up to $1,000 a year, for such benefits as computer literacy; education/training that addresses the needs of a particular plant; and greater access to college-level work.

Programs for employees laid off focus on career counseling and retraining.

A specific example of the worker-learning approach used by Joint Funds initiatives is The Academy, established with Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti. Ford linked with EMU faculty because they already had developed a whole-language instructional approach in basic skills for

adults. Faculty began working with the Fund committee, setting up a language program focused on small groups of workers who read, discussed and wrote about topics. A traditional basic skills program, on the other hand, concentrates on discrete skills.

The EMU staff discovered that employees were most concerned about their math skills because of the move toward statistical process control. According to a description in BCEL, the newsletter of the Business Council for Effective Literacy, workers were more willing to sign up for a job-related math program than for reading/writing because "being rusty in math" carried less of a stigma. The failure of traditional math instruction for adults persuaded EMU to develop a math program on the same principles as whole language.

It focuses on practical math that workers need in their lives--to construct a driveway, repair a car, deal with property tax increases, or work with plant safety and production figures. As in language courses, those enrolled use group discussion and writing to reinforce new skills.

"This focus on learners' existing interests and abilities helps to assure the 'personal growth' that UAW-Ford has set as a goal of its basic skills program," says BCEL.

A union-designed literacy program often cited as a model is that developed by the **Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union** in New York City. Serving primarily women with limited English skills, the ACTWU Workers Education Program offers more than 35 different classes weekly. Non-English speaking workers can learn English skills; they can learn to read and write in their own language as well. Classes range from basic skills to GED; the program helped immigrants fulfill educational requirements for the amnesty program.

Through a delegate system, each class nominates a fellow student who organizes attendance monitoring, trips, celebrations and workshops. Topics for these range from immigrant rights to family finances. The program is funded by grants from the Consortium for Workers Education, a collaboration of several unions in New York City which receives state and federal grants. It fosters student-centered learning in all of its affiliated unions.

The ACTWU curriculum for beginning-level students, based on several years' work with students in the program, uses the experience of an immigrant in the city. It covers such topics as transportation, health, housing. "Through pictures, stories, and vocabulary, the immigrants' actual experiences--as seasonal or indefinitely employed factory workers, as tenants, and as users of the mass transit system--are reflected," says a description of the consortium in the *Harvard Educational Review*. Vocabulary and grammar develop from the most important needs and interests of the workers.

By April 1992 all operators of commercial vehicles must pass a new test in order to be licensed. Required by the federal Commercial Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1986, the new procedure is uncovering literacy problems among drivers. For example, testing started early in California; from one-third to one-half of the drivers who took the test without training were failing it.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees are among those unions trying to help drivers. It developed a study kit for the test, which includes a videotape and audiocassette, as well as study books. For example, in Prince George's County, Md., union stewards fan out to dozens of lots and garages operated by the county school and transportation systems to distribute the kit and show the video. All those who have used the materials, according to the stewards, have passed the tests.

Another example of a literacy program that goes beyond basic skills is the Skills Enhancement Training Program of the **Food and Beverage Workers Union Local 32** in

NEW LITERACY TOOL: HOME LEARNING

The Laborers-AGC (Association of General Contractors) Education and Training Fund has 73 training centers and is one of the largest union training programs in the country. Even so, its literacy outreach jumped dramatically when it began a program using videocassettes that workers can take home. Based on reading courses developed by Kentucky Educational Television and distributed through College Video, Laborers-AGC members can improve basic reading skills while sitting at home--avoiding the stigma that prevents many workers from signing up for literacy programs. College Video handles the administration, including monthly tracking reports sent to the national Laborers-AGC office.

Project SALSA (Southwest Advanced Learning System for Adults) experimented with telecommunications to connect Motorola employees with interactive software located at the University of Illinois. Using Apple home learning stations, workers had access to 10,000 hours of lessons, ranging from basic skills at the third-grade level to post-graduate work.

Washington, D.C. Its members provide cafeteria service in many of the public buildings in the capital--from Congress to museums to government offices. Many never finished high school, primarily because of family obligations, not because they flunked out, organizers of the program point out. But it takes persuasion to entice people who have been out of the education system for a long time to come back. Working with local employers and a federal grant, the skills program offers 18 weeks of classes after-hours and on-site. Reading and writing skills are integrated with "hospitality" skills. According to the spokesperson for one employer, Guest Services, Inc., the response of participants to the classes has brought "self-esteem back into the workplace. Other workers see that this opportunity for education is available to them."

Examples Underfoot

The U.S. Department of Education is in its fourth year of funding workplace literacy projects, provided by the Adult Education Act. At least one has been funded in every state, some with multi-year grants. Lists of funded projects are available from the Division of Adult Education and Literacy.

Sources

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Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, Forest P. Chisman, 440 First St., NW, Suite 415, Washington, DC 20001; (202) 783-7058.

Lots for the Digging in Adult Literacy

Life is tough for those who want to link higher literacy with better jobs, or just a job, period. "Is the Story Literacy, Decent Jobs, or Political Will?" a new report from the Education Writers Association based on case studies of adults seeking literacy help in six communities. The studies were written by reporters in the communities.

Three reporters documented the experiences of people and agencies as the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program got underway. This is the heart of welfare reform. It is intended to give welfare recipients, most of whom are women with children, skills and training to gain a foothold on stable employment. The report describes programs in San Diego, Calif.; Akron, Ohio; and rural Belle Glade, Fla.

If an adult not in the welfare system wants to obtain higher literacy skills for a job or job upgrading, is there a system and, if so, how do they access it? Four reporters looked for literacy/training systems in Laurel, Miss.; Tucson, Ariz.; and Westchester County, N.Y.

The consensus of both sets of studies is not encouraging to policymakers. Where the quality of education/training is high and good support is available, welfare recipients can move into independence. But such programs are costly. As for a system that adults can tap for help on literacy, there is not much of one. Programs are scattered; adults are largely on their own to find them and often to finance their training. The "bottom line" problem in many of the communities is a lack of jobs with incomes that will support a family.

The report, however, has good news. There are interesting stories for reporters on the issue of adult literacy. Data usually are not available, and the picture is more varied and complex than it might look on the surface. But adult literacy is a "people" beat with important public policy questions.

"Is the Story Literacy, Decent Jobs, or Political Will?" includes articles from each community, summaries of findings and tips for reporters (Education Writers Association, 1001 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036; $10 each; media copies free).